

**“The trick, always, is what
do you reveal? What do
you not reveal?
Subversion is essential
to art.”**

**David Cronenberg as Dr. Decker
in Nightbreed, 1990**

David Cronenberg talks to Atom Egoyan about *M. Butterfly*, the pitfalls of preview screenings, and the true nature of “selling out” to a major U.S. studio

Atom Egoyan



In May, *Take One* invited Atom Egoyan to interview David Cronenberg. It seemed natural to put two of Canada's best and brightest cinéastes together, Egoyan from the post-tax shelter bust, and Cronenberg, a 25-year veteran of the Canadian cinema wars. The following is an edited version of their hour-and-a-half conversation.

Edited by Marc Glassman and Wyndham Wise.

EGOYAN: I think what really excites us both is being able to show people things they don't think they should be seeing. Can you entertain this idea, while at the same time considering a mass audience?

CRONENBERG: That's the trick.

EGOYAN: Your latest films certainly have made people feel uncomfortable, but not with the safety net of a genre to fall back

on. They have been daring films, and very exciting.

CRONENBERG: The trick, always, is what do you reveal? What do you not reveal? Subversion is essential to art. We don't even have to discuss that, we know that. Well, if you're working within a genre, it's more simple to subvert. If you are not working within a genre, then it's a much more subtle thing. *M. Butterfly* is a Broadway play, and it's not really a genre film, but it does have traditional elements within it. I sent Warners 30 minutes from our first cut, and they made this great trailer that makes *M. Butterfly* look like a David Lean movie. "It was a time of turbulent change. Two people meet." I thought, I wish I had made this movie. All the shots are from the movie, and there's a scene at the Great Wall. There's a scene of the riots in Paris in '68. But my film is not an epic. And it's not an exotic love story either. The subversive elements in the play are there in the film, but the film works in a much different way. It's much more

emotional and less schematic. One of the things about narratives is that they are predictable, comfortable things. The possibilities for twists, turns, subversion are really quite endless. When you are inventing your own form, as you and I have done in our early films, you don't have that possibility. The form itself is the subversive thing. The audience is coming up against that right away. It might actually even shut them out of the movie. When you are working in a genre, you have a chance to seduce them, to get them more involved, and then you can do things. Now, I know that one could say that's just a rationalization for selling out and doing mainstream films. Well, it could be. It depends on the film.

EGOYAN: It also depends on the conviction with which you do it. The uncanny thing about any viewer, no matter how uneducated they are in film theory, is that they can sense whether a filmmaker is doing what he is doing with a degree of conviction. If you are doing something in a calculated man-



Egoian: Are we condemned to aspire to make images that are so forceful that we can't watch them ultimately? Cronenberg: I think, in a way, that's what you want to do. You want to press the tooth that hurts. That's what you really want to do.

ner, the viewer will detect it and divorce themselves from the image. It's amazing how that works.

CRONENBERG: I think that's really true.

EGOIAN: One thing I have learned in my relationship with the viewer is that they can feel everything I am feeling. If I'm suspicious about a character, no amount of coverage and music is going to camouflage that. Very often with Hollywood films, the whole process of filming is to delay decision making until the last possible moment. The film is malleable and can change form depending on the input, and how many people are involved.

CRONENBERG: But you can only do so much of that. I mean, obviously if that system worked there would never be a failure. A film is malleable for a long time. There are things you can do to the film. You can re-edit, you can change your sound mix. You can put in off-camera lines of dialogue. You can rewrite your film. Of course, there can be interference in the post production process. But you don't have to do what the studio says if the final cut is yours. Yet, you have agreed to submit to the process. In

other words, they can try to prove to you that you are wrong about the way you want the film. That you should re-shoot the ending, or you should take off the prologue, or whatever it is that they are worried about. Their weapon is a preview screening where 350 Santa Monicans will turn, to your horror, into Siskel and Ebert and say, "I didn't like the art direction, the sets are bad, your dialogue is no good." You have to submit to that. It's like trial by fire.

EGOIAN: Did you get any response from Chinese transvestites?

CRONENBERG: I got a man who said Asian transvestites will find John Lone hysterically funny. The guy who wrote it was white. At test screenings they actually ask whether you are white, Latino, or whatever. I happen to know some Asian transvestites who will not think John is hysterical. They will think he is terrific. But it is an interesting process. I was talking to Jeremy Thomas about it. Bertolucci doesn't want to ever do that. He won't agree to test screen his films. Jeremy has said he has actually begged him to screen sometimes, and I can understand why he doesn't want to because it becomes

a big part of studio politics. I had to have a meeting the next day where a studio executive said about *M. Butterfly*, "my sister-in-law was very offended by the scene with the German woman. Do we have to have the scene with the German woman?"

EGOIAN: How do you deal with that sort of stress?

CRONENBERG: I say there are ten reasons why that scene has to be in the movie, and I enumerate them. I don't panic. I don't get hostile. I reason with them. Sometimes they're right. This is the horrible, wonderful thing. You might have people saying really dumb, stupid things to you, and then suddenly someone touches a nerve. You know when they've touched a nerve, because you are thinking the same thing. This guy who has just said five things that you thought were really irrelevant or stupid, touches a nerve and says, "I thought this scene ended in the wrong place." And you realize he is right, because you had been thinking the same thing too. You've got to be incredibly strong, first of all to resist the bad suggestions, and secondly to accept the good ones. What I do, in my Machiavellian way, which is very natural for me because I'm not a confrontational person, is that I give them what I can give them. I will go and cut that line because I agree with them. So they feel good, and then I say I can't take the scene with the German lady out. I know it was disturbing to your sister-in-law, but first of all



M Butterfly: left, in production at the Great Wall; middle, the bonfire; right, John Lone and Jeremy Irons

you have to understand that this movie is going to be disturbing to a lot of people.

EGOYAN: We're working in an industry where panic seems to be an operative word. Some people thrive on that.

CRONENBERG: It's part of the process of filmmaking to deal with other people. It's not a novel, where maybe you're only dealing with your publisher and your editor. A lot of people get involved, and obviously the more money that's involved the more people are involved.

EGOYAN: Let's talk about that aspect, about the people who are involved. You've worked with a certain core of people, as I have, but I'm finding I'm at a stage now where this notion of a "family" is beginning to get a bit frayed. At what point do you decide that the interests of the people you are working with are something that is almost a scared trust, and to what extent do you objectify these people as just being individuals who are contributing to your vision? This is a very sensitive issue.

CRONENBERG: It's a really sensitive issue, and all I can say that every possible permutation and combination has existed and can exist. It depends on what your understanding is up front. I found this to work quite well even in Hollywood. The response to our production from Warner Bros. has been fantastic, even though they might be worried *M. Butterfly* is an expensive project, given its marginal subject matter. We were absolutely straight with them. We sent them production reports. When there was a problem, we told them about it. I gave them every opportunity to comment on the script.

Since the first screening, Warner Bros. has sent me 15 scripts to read, even though the first test screening was not wildly successful. They had the most wonderful time working with us, no headaches. They didn't have to fly executives to Beijing because we were freaking out and going over budget. We never had an executive on set. Being a Canadian, I didn't do the Cimino thing like, "fuck you, I'm an artist." Of course, I might be misrepresenting Cimino, but this is the way that other people have thought of him—"I'm an artist and if it takes more money to realize my vision, you'll just have to come up with it." The French work that way, too. You know how that works in France. Once started, the producer has to continue to put money into the film...

EGOYAN: ...and the director has a governmental decree.

CRONENBERG: That's right. It's a dangerous, strange situation and many producers have been totally ruined by a crazed director. You have to have a straightforward understanding about the way it will be. After a while, you become like an old boxer. You know the moves. You don't have to take all the punches. You realize you don't have to go out there and take the hits. You can slip the punches, and how you slip the punches is by being crafty and knowing. Do not put yourself into an untenable situation. That's how you make good films. Aside from the artistic problems that you always have, you can make informed decisions about the pragmatics and the logistics of making a film. You don't work with bad people. It still doesn't guarantee you any-

thing, but it works to an amazing degree. When Jeremy Thomas had some Japanese investors pull out in the middle of *Naked Lunch*, we were suddenly in limbo. So Jeremy wasn't really protecting me from that disaster. Gabriella (Martinelli, co-producer of *Naked Lunch*) and I had to get involved, helping him find new financing. What were we to do with the crew while we were working on the financing? We didn't want the crew to break up. That's one of the reasons that I did *Scales of Justice* for the CBC. It was to keep everybody together while Jeremy was financing. Now the reason for going with (producer) David Geffen and Warner Bros. was to not have to do that again. I knew the money wouldn't fall through. Being fiscally responsible means a huge amount in this business. What am I selling Warners? Well, my reputation, and this and that. But I've also got a reputation for not ever going over budget, and that's even been more solidified because of *Naked Lunch*. So I don't care if they are more attracted to my fiscal responsibility than my art. The thing is to agree that you are making the same movie.

EGOYAN: So you obviously don't feel that the tensions and conflict on set are somehow part of what makes a film.

CRONENBERG: No, I hate that. I've talked to a zillion actors...

EGOYAN: ...who constantly put themselves into that state...

CRONENBERG: ...who have worked with directors who want that, and they all to a man or woman have said that they work best the way I work, which is to give them

protection and security, and not hysteria, pressure, and terror. I hate actors who have to involve everybody else in their own process of work. To me, that is not professional. If an actor needs to be anxious and sleepless to work, let him do it by himself. Don't ask me to provide that for him. A professional actor should be able to go out there and do his stuff with your guidance and help. And if he has trouble, you find a way to help him. That's the reason why I'm interested in being an actor, to see what your dynamics are on someone else's set where you don't have the responsibility of being the director. You only have the responsibility to your character and to deliver that character.

EGOYAN: You see different things. There are certain hierarchies that you feel should be falling into place, but you're just an outsider at that point. It becomes almost this nightmare situation where...

CRONENBERG: ...suddenly you are not the director anymore. I haven't had that. For me it was quite pleasant. In fact, I over did it on *Nightbreed* because I was so obedient that I didn't actually offer anything as a normal actor would, being so worried about being a director. I didn't do that on *Blue*. I talked to Don McKellar. I said, "don't think I'm trying to direct. What I want to do is be an actor who can give you possibilities that you choose from."

EGOYAN: That worked better. Don told me that you insisted on a crane shot for every appearance.

CRONENBERG: Oh yeah, right.

EGOYAN: That you insisted on being driven there in a Lamborghini, and that you were being very demanding and quite intolerant.

CRONENBERG: I think I was such a suck,

actually. I probably overdid it the other way. It was terrific experience, and I achieved what I wanted, which was to perform better. I found some things out about myself.

EGOYAN: A fondness for carpets.

CRONENBERG: I got my web feet on screen again. They haven't been on screen since *Crimes of the Future*. But I don't think you could see them. They're curling into the nap of the carpet. It was great fun to do that for exactly that reason. You literally want to play another role, not the director.

EGOYAN: When you do a film like *Blue*, do you entertain any fantasy of ever going back to a small budget? There is no romantic notion in your mind...?

CRONENBERG: I don't consider it romantic to make a low-budget film. It's just a different way of working. In other words, I am saying I could do a version of *M. Butterfly* for two million dollars. Absolutely, I could. I could do it more like the play. I could do it in Toronto. It would be a totally different movie, obviously. But I could do a project that I could call *M. Butterfly*. That's one of the interesting things I learned from doing *Friday the 13th* and *Scales of Justice*. I do a maximum two pages a day when I shoot a feature. I come in with a script that's 80 pages. It's not as outrageous as it sounds. That, to me, is the trade off. I cut on paper so I don't go in with a 120-page script. That means I can shoot two pages a day, no more, and not have an impossible schedule and an outrageous budget, which, if I had 120 pages I would have. All of this goes into the way I make movies, and over the years I've seen what works for me and what doesn't. So I've got my chops down. I don't even have to think about that anymore.

Then, suddenly for television, instead of doing a maximum of two pages a day, I'm doing seven to 11 pages. That's a huge jump. Can I do it? Well, I did it. I did it on *Scales*, and I did it once really well, I thought, and once not so well. As one might expect, the rigour of doing that forced me to do some things formalistically that were rather bold, things that maybe I wouldn't have dared to do in a feature. When I do features, I want to leave as much possibility in the editing room as there can be. I will do a close-up even though I'm sure that I am not going to use it that scene. Then, in the editing room, I find that I've thrown away two other scenes, and I'm making up a third scene, and I need that part of the close-up. I want to be able to have that if I need it. Well, I gave that up, and I got more rigorous for television. I proved to myself that I can do that and be excited by the rigour of it. What you don't get is as much money. And your crew doesn't get as much money. If I have the choice between being paid \$20,000 to do a feature, which I can do in the way I want to, and the same feature really, but I'm going to get paid a million dollars, what should I do? Of course I want the million dollars. Why not?

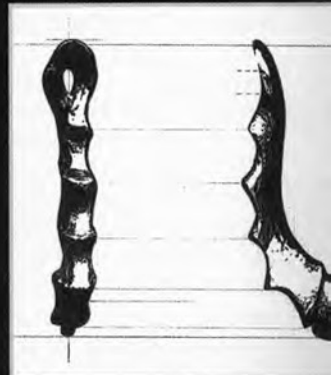
EGOYAN: At this point you must have a sense of what type of images settle in a viewer's subconscious, the images that will stay with the viewer, the images that are going to create the sense of excitement on the part of the viewer that you desire. Do you find that your approach to designing a shot has become reflexive?

CRONENBERG: No. It's totally intuitive.

EGOYAN: Martin Scorsese says that he still is flummoxed every time he has to think of

The Strange Objects of David Cronenberg's Desire

An exhibition of drawings, objects and creatures from the films of David Cronenberg



Organized by Seibu Department Stores, Tokyo, and the Cinematheque Ontario. Curated by Fern Bayer. At the Institute of Contemporary Culture, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, September 7 to October 17, 1993.

where to put a camera. It's still something that he approaches as though it was the first time. Do you find that visualizing something is second nature to you?

CRONENBERG: It is very intuitive, and when I get stuck, I don't know why I'm stuck. Suddenly, there is a scene that's really very simple, but I can't make it work. But this is very common, I think. In a way, it's knowing my own responses to the imagery, and I always have had a very visceral feeling for what wasn't right. I mean, this is one of my major discoveries coming from the written word and not having any reason to think that I had a particular visual sense at all when I started to make my first films. I wasn't a wonderful sketcher, or artist, or anything like that. So I didn't know if I would know the difference between a shot that

was working and not, nor did I care if the camera was at this level or that level. As I started to work and shoot my own first films, I found that I did have a very specific visual sense. Whether it was good or bad was irrelevant. It still holds. Over the years, I've also got my working technique down with the actors. Now I'm at the point where I am approaching my



Jeremy Irons in *Dead Ringers*, 1988

shoots like a documentarian. I'm relying totally on intuition to make the strongest visual statements.

EGOYAN: What images from your own films have shocked you the most by how vulnerable they have made you?

CRONENBERG: I'm at my most vulnerable verbally, not visually.

EGOYAN: I got a sense of that when I was

watching *The Brood* yesterday. The dialogue seemed really honest.

CRONENBERG: I think I'm still a word person. It's to say the unspoken thing. That is the thing that makes me the most vulnerable and reveals the most.

EGOYAN: Are there moments when an actor or actors have said, or expounded, a truth?

CRONENBERG: Absolutely. Things that I didn't know.

EGOYAN: Are there visual moments?

CRONENBERG: Yes, one example that has always struck me was in *Dead Ringers* when Jeremy (Irons) was playing the twins, and Elliot visits Beverley in the hospital. It reminded me of my father on his deathbed. That was really incredibly potent. I actually told that to Jeremy. But it didn't necessarily mean anything to anyone else. People have seen a million scenes with guys with oxygen devices up their noses. Visually they don't mean anything to them or to me. Yet, what Jeremy was doing was extraordinary. The way he was breathing and speaking was so accurately what my father did without Jeremy knowing it. That was incredibly potent. I can't watch that without being really touched and hurt at the same time. How much of that comes across, I don't know. It's very subjective.

EGOYAN: Are we condemned to aspire to make images that are so forceful that we can't watch them ultimately?

CRONENBERG: I think, in a way, that's what you want to do. I mean, that's where the catharsis is. *The Brood* is full of those things for me, because it was so personal, and I think in a way that's what you want. You want to press the tooth that hurts. That's what you really want to do ●

CINEMATHEQUE ONTARIO

From left: maquette of the Fly Creature, *The Fly*, 1986; Peter Weller and the Agent from *Interzone*, *Naked Lunch*, 1991; drawing of 'Mutant Women' instruments, *Dead Ringers*, 1988; Videodrome helmet, *Videodrome*, 1983; preliminary drawing for Kiki's and Yves' transformation, *Naked Lunch*, 1991

